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# Governance, participation and local perceptions of protected areas: Unwinding traumatic nature in the Blouberg Mountain Range

## **ABSTRACT**

Local perceptions of protected areas are important for conservation and the sustainability of protected areas. We undertook qualitative and ethnographic fieldwork to explore relationships between people and protected areas in the Blouberg Mountain Range, South Africa. The history of land use and current relationships with protected areas reveal legacies of marginalisation and immiseration, giving credence to a theory of traumatic nature. The impacts of traumatic nature manifest in local discourses and narratives of nature, protected areas and conservation.

## **KEYWORDS**

Traumatic nature, protected areas, park-people relationships, Blouberg Mountain Range, participatory governance

## **INTRODUCTION**

Protected areas are ‘a clearly defined geographical space, recognised, dedicated and managed, through legal or other effective means, to achieve the long-term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values’ (Dudley 2008: 8). Historically, top-down approaches characterised the establishment and management of protected areas, excluding local people whose livelihoods depended on the direct exploitation of natural resources (Anthony and Szabo 2011). In the 1980s, a new discourse emerged which recognised the importance of local people’s access to natural resources reflected in some protected area initiatives through community-based natural resource management, co-

management and participatory conservation initiatives (Phillips 2003; Ghimire and Pimbert 1997; Murphree 2002).

The success of participatory approaches depends on prevailing socio-economic, political and institutional conditions in specific protected areas (Hirschnitz-Garbers and Stoll-Kleeman 2011). Perceptions held by local people and by biodiversity managers concerning conservation and one another are critical for the provisioning of benefits and participation by locals (Hirschnitz-Garbers and Stoll-Kleeman 2011). Understanding these factors is crucial because protected areas cannot be sustained without the support of local people (Anthony and Szabo 2011).

The history of protected areas has long-term impacts on how they are understood by local people especially in instances such as the Bahananwa peoples featured in this paper, whose environmental and social relations were influenced by colonial wars, deportation, relocation and the depredations of apartheid rule when conservation areas were first established in the region. The results of our historical and ethnographic research show how current attitudes towards conservation are coloured by local people's understandings of nature, which have been forged through the collective experience of injurious processes. This collective experience is rendered traumatic by the meanings attached to it. As Smelser observes, students of collective trauma stress its 'indelibility at a sociocultural level' (2004:41). Van Assche et al (2012) argue that when legacies of disempowerment and marginalisation become apparent in the ways local people think about their natural environment their effects on governance should be understood through a theory of 'traumatic nature'. The theory asserts that traumatic nature is the outcome of a process whereby the governance of natural resources is persistently experienced as arbitrary and unjust and narratives of social identity in relation to place are moulded through the imposition of hegemonic, ideological forces (ibid: 177).

Van Assche et al (2012) developed their theory in relation to the example of the Danube Delta where people's environmental perceptions and experiences have been shaped by the impacts of disempowerment, marginalisation and stigmatisation, accompanying dramatic shifts in natural resource governance from the immediate post-war period to the present day. These changes can be characterised as traumatogenic in as much as they have 'sudden, comprehensive, fundamental and unexpected' destructive impacts on pre-existing social and ecological relations (Sztompka 2004: 158-162). Traumatic nature manifests as anxiety, resistance, resentment and disempowerment that are apparent in the ways people conceive of and behave towards nature.

To our knowledge, few studies have adopted a historical analysis of the impacts of the socio-political aspects of land and natural resource use and environmental governance on contemporary perceptions, discourses and behaviours towards protected areas in South Africa. In this paper, we apply the concept of traumatic nature to explore the history of land and natural resource use, along with the impact of protected area establishment and governance on local people's discourses and narratives of nature, protected areas and conservation in the Blouberg Mountain Range

## **METHODS**

### *Data collection*

Fieldwork was conducted from October, 2010-March, 2012 in the Blouberg Mountain Range, Limpopo Province, South Africa. We used a purposive sampling strategy to identify villages targeted in management plans as the 'main beneficiaries' of the Blouberg Nature Reserve (BNR) and Maleboch Nature Reserve (MNR). Informants were approached via gatekeepers from the Blouberg Municipality, Blouberg Tribal Authority and village headmen. A snowball sampling strategy targeted individuals who had previous interactions with the nature reserves

and government agencies. We interviewed 20 rural villagers and headmen from Setloking, Ga-Kgatla, Burchrecht, My Darling, Glenferness and Indermark. Villagers were Northern-Sotho speakers who operated a communal land use system based on agriculture and livestock farming. All villagers were unemployed and 65% were supported by government pensions. Seventy five percent were male, reflecting the sampling strategy which targeted household heads.

In addition, we also interviewed eighteen stakeholders including: previous landowners of the BNR, members of the Blouberg Tribal Authority, Blouberg Tourism Association, the Manoko community, Kune Moya and Limpopo, Economic, Development, Environment and Tourism (LEDET). These stakeholders were interviewed to gain insights into the history of land use, the establishment of protected areas and their subsequent governance and management. We also analysed management plans, strategic plans and co-management agreements to understand how these influence opportunities for locals to engage with protected area management or to benefit from the reserves. This extensive material informs the context for the current paper, in which our focus is fixed on analysing the experiences and perspectives of villagers.

NC undertook ethnographic fieldwork by living in two rural villages surrounding the nature reserves where she interacted with rural villagers. Ethnography helped us learn about the local language and culture, build trustful working relationships with informants and obtain in-depth insights about people's relationships with protected areas. This multi-method gave access to in-depth qualitative data and important historical and cultural information central for contextualising local narratives and discourses. To test the accuracy of information derived from interviews we triangulated the data by making cross-comparisons with longitudinal ethnographic observations and checking statements with other interviewees and members of the interviewee's family where possible.

In what follows where we refer to people as ‘young’, it signifies they are less than 30 years old whereas ‘older’ refers to retired people over 60 years. In some cases, short quotations were not assigned to individuals but were used to illustrate a point that was made by a wide range of informants.

### *Data analysis*

Villagers’ narratives and discourses were analysed from semi-structured interviews and field notes. Discourse analysis is defined as ‘the unveiling of discursive construction and discursive production, by means of careful reading, listening, observing, and looking for repetitions, patterns and the network of assumptions behind these patterns’ (Van Assche et al: 168). Discourses provide insights into representations of the environment and of people’s relationship with them, these factors are linked to wider social issues related to identity, sense making and general wellbeing (Sumares and Fidelis 2011). Human sense making takes place within narrative structures, which refer to the selection and ordering of events and their representations into meaningful patterns (Sumares and Fidelis 2011). Narrative structures are located ‘in a larger narrative context, of what happens before us and what comes after. Environments matter because they embody that larger context’ (O’Neil et al, 2008: 163). Discourses in the Blouberg pertaining to protected areas, interactions with wildlife authorities and elements of nature (e.g. animals, landscapes) have their own respective histories and are interpreted through narrative terms to frame peoples’ stories (Sumares and Fidelis 2011).

We applied context from South Africa’s colonial and apartheid history to examine the meanings behind local discourses. Narratives and discourses feature ‘good’ and ‘bad’ characters (government actors, private landowners, rural villagers and leopards). We also observed that affected individuals devise counter discourses to challenge these notions. Concepts, narratives and discourses serve as tools of power and resistance to highlight

conflicts between different social actors. Different social actors have their own use of language, definitions and interpretations of concepts, which are shaped by their associated positions and agendas in relation to wildlife conservation. The representation of animals, landscapes and different social actors in discourses also imply different valuations and preferred uses of the environment

Transcriptions from semi-structured interviews and participant observation were entered into the software programme NVivo 9 (QSR International 2009) and coded in relation to specific themes: protected area establishment and consultation; governance of protected areas, perceptions of rural villagers of the role of nature reserves and their understanding of conservation; and interactions with government actors. In addition codes were searched and pulled together to identify reoccurring themes and ideas of particular interest. This form of analysis is defined as grounded theory, which places less emphasis on pre-defined theory; rather the data itself generates ideas and themes emerge, which allow the researcher to identify and apply relevant theoretical frameworks (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011).

## **HISTORY OF CHANGING GOVERNANCE AND LAND USE**

### *Colonialism*

The Bahananwa settled in the Blouberg Mountain from 1722-1830 (Joubert and Schalkwyk 1999; Joubert 2004). The modern-day Afrikaner population are descended from the Voortrekkers (Boers) who colonised the Cape in 1652 (Worden 2007) and penetrated the Bahananwa territory by 1848 (Makhura 1993). From the 1860s, missionaries, explorers, hunters and land speculation companies penetrated the Bahananwa territory heightening conflicts over access to land and natural sources (Kriel 2004). The annexation of the Transvaal in 1877 by the British created a state structure and society based on imperial interests (Makhura 1993). The British created a new taxation system along with demands for

the Bahananwa to become British subjects and to relocate from their mountain home. However, the end of the Anglo-Boer War in 1881 war resulted in the independence of the Transvaal republic from the British Empire and the inheritance of the British state structure by the Boer government (Laband 2005).

The Boer government introduced the Occupation Act in 1886, whereby African communities were translocated to reserves to make land available for white settlers (Makhura 1993). The Squatter Law followed in 1887, in which no more than five African households were allowed to live outside the reserves on each farm (Makhura 1993). In 1888, the Native Commissioner, visited the Blouberg to inform the Bahananwa of new laws and plans to relocate them from the mountain (Sonntag 1983). The Bahananwa's refusal to be relocated or take part in a census for the delivery of hut taxes cumulated in the Bahananwa-Boer War of 1894 (Schalkwyk and Smith 2004). Both sides experienced loss of life and many of the Bahananwa were indentured on farms as labourers for five years (Schalkwyk and Smith 2004). The Bahananwa territory was divided up and distributed to European farmers.

#### *Apartheid and the establishment of the nature reserves*

The Bantu-Self Government Act of 1959 resulted in the deportation of non-whites into designated Bantustans, an adaptation of the former reserve areas (Augustinus 2000). The relocation of the Bahananwa into the Lebowa Bantustans under apartheid rule resulted in the nationalisation of the Bahananwa into the generalised classification of Northern-Sotho speakers (Joubert 2004). The Bahananwa refused to cooperate with the imposition of apartheid legislation relating to the introduction of passbooks and the new laws relating to courts for chiefs and headmen (Joubert 2004). In response, the Chief Bantu Commissioner halted the payment of pensions to the elderly and the maintenance of water systems in the



area (Joubert 2004). Currently the Blouberg is one of the least developed regions in the present-day Limpopo Province (Blouberg Local Municipality, 2007-2008).

In 1972, European farms were purchased by the apartheid government for incorporation into the Lebowa Bantustan. Over 8,000 hectares of land held in trust by the South African Management Trust was left fallow for a decade and used as recreational hunting grounds for government officials. In 1983, the land was proclaimed as the provincial BNR and extended in size from 1993 resulting in the acquisition of land from the surrounding Bantustan villages and the provisioning of alternative agricultural land for affected communities (Limpopo Provincial Government 2004).

The MNR was established in 1981 by the Lebowa Bantustan Government. The land occupied by the MNR was traditionally used for communal grazing and agricultural land for the villages: My Darling, Burchrecht, Setloking and Ga-Kgatla. Interviews with members of the Bahananwa Tribal Authority revealed that the Chief agreed to the establishment of the reserve in consultation with three headmen from the surrounding villages. The headman from Ga-Kgatla were excluded from the decision making process due to their status as a minority clan preventing them from participating in the tribal affairs of the Bahananwa (Sebola 2004). The people of Ga-Kgatla complained to the Chief stating government officials had threatened the villagers with heavy fines and arrests, if they intervened with the reserve's establishment. The Chief halted the project but the fencing of the reserve continued after the Chief's death in 1981 as an elderly woman explained:

‘When they established this nature reserve they never sat down with the people and asked to establish a nature reserve, we just saw something happening...people fencing. The chief

refused the establishment of the nature reserve...when he was dead they continued to fence, before he was buried.’

The Bantustans were dismantled during the demise of the apartheid regime in 1994 (Fabricius and de Wet 2002). The Restitution Act of 1994 allowed individuals or communities who had lost their property as a result of apartheid laws after 1913 to submit claims for the restitution of land (Fabricius and de Wet 2002).

## **PRESENT DAY GOVERNANCE OF PROTECTED AREAS**

### *Blouberg Nature Reserve*

The regulation, planning and management of protected areas in the Limpopo are managed by LEDET and the management of tourism activities by the Limpopo Tourism Agency. An assessment of Limpopo’s nature reserves in 2000 showed that nature reserves were running at an annual loss of ZAR 30 million, functioning without action plans and reserve facilities were in poor condition (Sebola, 2004). In 2000, the Limpopo Tourism Agency addressed the financial crisis of its nature reserves by commercialising 15 of its 53 reserves and outsourcing development and management of tourism to private operators (Sebola 2004).

The Limpopo Tourism Agency outsourced the development and management of tourism facilities in the BNR to Kune Moya. Kune Moya has invested funds to upgrade accommodation for tourists, developed wilderness trails, guided nature and birding walks and game drives to bolster the reserve’s tourism potential. In 1997, the Manoko community, descendants of the Bahananwa submitted a land claim over a section of the BNR (NCC-Group 2012a). Kune Moya plays an important role in providing support and development

services to the beneficiaries of land restitution, through the empowerment and training of local communities in the sustainable ownership and management of their land.

Kune Moya will enter into a partnership with the land claimants on finalisation of the land claim where revenue generated from tourism will be shared: 40% Kune Moya, 40% claimants and 20% Limpopo Tourism Agency with a view of handing over the business in 5-7 years. The Manoko's will also enter into a contractual park agreement with LEDET if the claim is successful to share conservation responsibilities and benefits and as a process to resolve land claims in protected areas (Fabricius et al. 2004). During the time of the study, the land claimants have no formal communication with LEDET, which foments feelings of alienation from reserve management issues, creates misunderstandings surrounding entitlements to receive benefits from the reserve and increases tensions between these parties.

Historically, the BNR was declared on state land for the purposes of fauna and flora conservation, therefore, any revenue generated from the reserve went directly to LEDET (Sebola 2004). In post-apartheid South Africa, the mission of the BNR has evolved to become more human-centred, with an aim to: 'manage the Blouberg Nature Reserve through sustainable utilisation on a viable basis and to manage the biological diversity of the sourish mixed, arid sweet bushveld and mixed bushveld to the benefit of the community' (Limpopo Provincial Government 2004: 21). However, the lack of a clear definition of the term 'community' which encompasses a wide range of stakeholders from neighbours, the general public and the 'scale of influence' which is not given a definition. Furthermore the land claimants also add greater complexity to the definition of the term 'community' as different user groups seek to access and benefit from the reserves' natural and cultural resources. The absence of comprehensive action plans creates ambiguity and inadequate provisioning of benefits to communities living adjacent to the reserve.

The BNR engaged with communities adjacent to the park by selling culled game meat, firewood and fodder at reduced tariffs, as well an outreach programme designed to provide economic incentives for protecting the cape vultures living on the mountain. Currently, firewood and fodder are no longer sold because the rate of consumption was deemed unsustainable. The irregularity of culled meat provisioning creates distrust, because people are poorly informed about reserve activities. A woman from Ga-Kgatla complained: ‘Now we are not receiving anything, nothing, not even meat, not even firewood. We don’t know when this will come because we don’t talk [with the reserves].’ The lack of communication between wildlife authorities and neighbouring villages is perceived by both parties as a constraint to their relationship.

#### *Maleboch Nature Reserve*

In 2007, the Limpopo Tourism Agency agreed to co-manage the reserve on behalf of the Bahananwa Tribal Authority (NCC-Groupb, 2012). LEDET are responsible for the conservation management function of the reserve and pay an annual conservation levy to the Bahananwa Tribal Authority and both parties share 50% of the revenue from the reserve (NCC-Group 2012b). However, tourism activities are largely inactive due to poor accommodation, the isolated nature of the reserve and limited staff capacity.

The MNR co-management committee was established to represent the interests of LEDET, the Blouberg Tourism Association and village trusts. The Blouberg Tourism Association manages community based tourism initiatives on behalf of the Bahananwa Tribal Authority to ensure accountability on how the royalties generated from the MNR are distributed. Village trusts recruit representatives from four villages surrounding the MNR to promote the interests of the local people and to submit requests on how the revenue is used by each

village. However, numerous barriers have constrained working relationships between these parties.

There is controversy surrounding the devolution of reserve revenue to local villages. A farmer from Setloking recalled that the revenue was used to purchase computers and equipment for a school. Another communal farmer commented that the revenue had ‘been used to buy the chief a car, what about the people?’ A woman from another village suggested that the revenue went ‘directly to the headman of the village, he was once given ZAR 500 we didn’t see any of that money.’ The majority of locals failed to identify any benefits from the reserve when questioned; typical responses included: ‘No, it helps us with nothing’ and ‘we are not benefiting, we are not benefiting at all.’

The MNR co-management committee has broken down for several reasons. Firstly, there is a high turnover of representatives from village trusts due to reported incidents of poaching wild animals from the reserves. In 2010, conflict within the Bahananwa caused tension and division due to the inauguration of a new Chief and the appointment of new staff within the Blouberg Tribal Authority. Currently, new government officials working for the Blouberg Tourism Association and local representatives of the village trusts no longer attend meetings with LEDET negatively impacting communication between stakeholders and the devolution of funds to surrounding communities.

## **LOCAL NARRATIVES**

In this section we present the main themes highlighted in villagers’ narratives of nature, protected areas and conservation.

### *Perceived costs of protected areas*

Protected areas have resulted in numerous perceived costs to rural villagers. A man from Ga-Kgatla explained how the MNR's establishment led to the displacement of people into outlying villages: 'Now people...are forced to move to stay in different villages, even when they have their own land here...because of the nature reserve, they don't have space'. Historically, the state's creation of protected areas in South Africa resulted in the displacement and exclusion of rural people from important natural and cultural resources (Khan, 1990). In the Blouberg, this materialised in the form of reduced access to land for agriculture, grazing, firewood, water and the collection and gathering of medicinal plants and wild fruits. A woman from Setloking explained: 'We lost lots of livestock since the establishment of this nature reserve. [Before] there was lots of livestock and they were grazing here [land occupied by the reserve]... [Now] I have to go up the mountain to graze, because I don't have enough grass here. It affects me badly.'

Since the establishment of the MNR many villagers have lost access to 4500 hectares of land which was communally shared as grazing pasture. Patterns of overgrazing and environmental degradation in the villages adjacent to the MNR have influenced seasonal grazing patterns forcing the elderly to herd livestock into the higher elevations of the Blouberg Mountain (Constant, Bell, and Hill 2015). In a similar narrative an older farmer from Setloking stated: 'Because we don't have room for our cattle any more due to the reserve, people are competing for space, that's why we have little grass around the villages, there isn't enough space...Before we had more land, before, it was full of grass, beautiful'. Patterns of environmental degradation are attributed to the reserves presence which resulted in the loss of land available for livestock grazing. The farmer draws on past memories of the land, a period marked by beauty *before* the reserves establishment.

The limited growth potential of Ga-Kgatla is perceived to be the cause of rural migration, as one woman stated: 'There's no place for the up and coming generation to build their houses, schools, and shops here... it took our space [nature reserve] that's why this village doesn't increase, it's always the same size. People are moving from here to faraway places.' Feelings of stagnation and the lack of infrastructure development and space are viewed as a causal factor for the migration of youth to escape the trappings of rural life. The village of Ga-Kgatla was according to one individual, 'pushed back onto land with no water, when the reserve was established. We are poor because of that, you can see, I'm sure, we are the poorest village in Blouberg.' The villager's state of impoverishment is blamed on the reserves establishment where he was forced to occupy land without access to water. The former graves of relatives, initiation sites and sacred areas used for prayer, healing and worship are also enclosed within reserve boundaries. A woman from Indermark stated: 'There are old sites where people use to live and graves...there is a certain place, the ancestors place, where the gods are, we would go and pray there. But we can no longer go there'. These important cultural sites were frequently visited in the past for their spiritual and cultural significance and to connect with the ancestors but are no longer accessible.

### *Conflicts with leopards*

Conflicts between local people and governmental actors revolve around leopards and the problems they pose to farmers. A man from Ga-Kgatla stated: 'The nature reserve provides a sanctuary for predators...and those predators come out to attack our livestock...We suffer because of those animals being protected, they care more about their own animals and do nothing to help.' It is commonplace for farming communities to blame protected areas for leopard depredations on livestock, because of the perceived inability of wildlife authorities to assist. Some communal farmers seek to address these issues through communication with

wildlife authorities as the headman of a village neighbouring the BNR explains: ‘We would like to call them and sit down with them...our communication is very slow...If a wild animal gets caught in a trap we don’t know who to speak with, or if it takes our cattle and goats...We need help with this.’

In other contexts an older woman from Setloking describes the creation of the reserve as a process which resulted in people’s separation from nature and as a causal factor underlying human-wildlife conflict in her area:

‘Long before when we lived here, we were living alongside wild animals, they were like family, you could see a leopard walking in the bush but not attacking the cattle, they were more like friends. After the reserve was established, the conflict happened, the domestic and wild animals were separated so when they came together it was like war and they no longer knew each other.’

A narrative emerges that draws on an idealised past, depicted as a time when people, domestic and wild animals lived in harmony *before* the reserve. Predation on domestic animals is likened to an act of war whereby the source of conflict is traced to the creation of the reserve that disrupts the harmonious relationships between the domesticated and wild. Another communal farmer comments: ‘It would be a joke to think domestic and wild animals could live together. The wild animals live in the reserve, they belong to the reserve. If they [leopards] cross over into our land I don’t like it, that’s our place and they aren’t meant to be in it.’ Leopards transgress marked spatial boundaries by moving from the reserves (where they belong) into communal land (where they do not belong). Leopards are frequently cited as belonging ‘to the reserves’ and understood to be the ‘government’s animals.’ Leopards feature in narratives as having ‘no respect for fences,’ or ‘giving a damn about the fact he was



on my farm’ accompanied by the speakers’ recollections of their interactions with government agencies: ‘they don’t listen’ and ‘they don’t care.’

### *Perceptions of nature reserve and conservation*

Discussions surrounding the role of nature reserves by rural villagers vary from: ‘The reserve is for nothing, it does nothing.’ Others draw on scientific arguments to justify the reserves presence. A woman from Indermark states: ‘to save the animals that would go extinct’ and a man from Ga-Kgatla to ‘secure animals, species and habitats, for future generations.’ Rural villagers acknowledge the role of nature reserves by drawing on scientific explanations from conservation rhetoric but then abruptly change their narratives and discourses to revert to descriptions of their historical and contemporary interactions with governmental actors. A woman from Indermark explained that the BNR was established:

‘To keep the wild animals, so that our youth must know those animals and they must study them ...we don’t want to lose them forever we want to keep them. But they [government officials] also said to our elders, ‘your people will come and join us to study the animals because people were killing them.’ We thought this was good...so the unborn people they must know the kudu, the leopard. Then we realised that all that talking was a strategy for them to take our land, knowing they would made promises to us to persuade us, without living up to it.”

A woman compares before and after the BNR was established in 1983 to portray a change in the aesthetics of the landscape: ‘Long before this place became a nature reserve they were practicing their culture, this place was beautiful, before they took the animals that’s when things got out of control, when the people came here to lie to them, now it doesn’t feel so beautiful.’ The physical landscape symbolises a moral landscape, blighted by a lack of trust that is subsequently deemed, no longer beautiful. In other contexts, the role of nature reserves

is acknowledged, but then represented as a contradiction to warn conservationists of what could become if local people continue to be excluded. A woman from Ga-Kgatla stated: 'It is important to protect those animals so the next generation can see those animals live, but first the reserve must fix the relationship with the people, that are more important otherwise no one is going to want to protect animals.'

### *Social conflict between people and reserves*

Poaching of wildlife by rural communities in protected areas and private farms is a contentious issue generating conflict between wildlife authorities, private landowners and rural villagers. Rural villagers represent themselves as victims of unfair poaching accusations from malicious authority figures while wildlife authorities relegate villagers as environmentally destructive and their poaching activities as 'barbaric, unlawful and cruel.' Each group responds to the imposition of these stereotypes defensively. A private landowner states, 'Communities pull out the 'I'm poor' card all the time. They say they have no other option but to hunt in order to survive' A villager iterates how the village as a whole is relegated as the causal factor of poaching incidents: 'they think that all we want to do, we as a village, is to kill animals and that all we want to do is eat them.' The headmen of two villages in the Blouberg express dissatisfaction with the lack of consultation regarding poaching incidents reported inside protected areas and asked that wildlife authorities approach them so that individuals can be made accountable and fined by the Blouberg Tribal Authority.

In other contexts wildlife authorities are subject to verbal threats and protected areas are targets for physical protests, which materialise in differential forms. Many villagers spoke of setting the nature reserves on fire to express resistance to the reserves' presence. Land claimants also threatened to cut down the fences of the BNR and drive their cattle onto the

land, these actions stem from frustrations over the time taken to settle the land claim by the provincial government. Former landowners from the Afrikaner community have responded to the Manoko land claim by submitting a counterclaim on the reserve. The land restitution process has resulted in a reassertion of African rights and entitlements as heralded in the land claimant's statement: 'Access to land is a fundamental right, we are meant to be here.' However, a previous private landowner also draws on his own perceived expropriation from the land during apartheid to assert his own rights to land ownership and access: 'We have the same claim by the same apartheid government... so we have the same rights, whatever rights they had.'

## **DISCUSSION**

### *Traumatic nature in the Blouberg Mountain Range*

In this paper, we argue that the concept of traumatic nature can be applied to understand contemporary perceptions and reactions towards protected areas and conservation in the Blouberg Mountain Range. We argue that our combined historical and contemporary analysis of natural resource governance demonstrates legacies of marginalisation and immiseration give rise to discursive and volatile narratives of nature, protected areas and social relationships.

### *Marginalisation*

The history of land and conflicts over natural resource use has resulted in the marginalisation of rural villagers as rights over land and natural resources were gradually eroded. Similarly, protected areas in South Africa served as instruments of displacement and subjugation parallel to the land evictions of the colonising process and apartheid rule, because rural villagers continued to be marginalised and estranged from important natural and cultural

resources (Khan 1990). In the Blouberg, the Lebowa government adopted an authoritarian approach to the establishment of the MNR, which occurred during a time when the Bahananwa were most vulnerable and the Bahananwa Tribal Authority failed to consult all headman and villagers about the establishment of MNR.

Numerous challenges are faced by protected areas in South Africa due to poor conservation planning, exclusionary approaches to conservation, non-cooperative governance, inconsistent declaration and protection procedures, management conundrums and resource constraints (Paterson 2010). In the Blouberg, resource constraints is a dominant issue influencing the ability of protected area managers to meet basic infrastructure requirements, create development and employment opportunities and effective benefit sharing systems. Strategic plans for both reserves identify funding levels required for effective management of the reserves over a five year period (NCC-Group, 2012a, NCC-Group, 2012b). This provides a step forward for defining financial and operational requirements and comprehensive management actions for the reserves. Concession agreements with private operators have been adopted in South African National Parks to manage tourism operations and improve the parks financial income (Paterson 2010). Similar models are being explored for provincial nature reserves such as the BNR to enable protected areas to become financially self-sufficient and income-generating (Paterson 2010).

A break-down in communication between wildlife authorities, land claimants and neighbouring villages in both reserves creates ambiguity surrounding the legitimacy of the land claim in the BNR and the devolution of benefits to land claimants and neighbouring villages. The absence of two-way communication and knowledge sharing is also reflected in the limited awareness of local problems related to human-wildlife conflicts and poaching of wild animals inside reserve boundaries. Management plans fail to clarify the agreed terms and conditions between user groups and to implement management objectives and actions

plans for devolving benefits to local people. Corruption within the Bahananwa Tribal Authority, intra-tribal conflict and the breakdown in communication between local rural villagers, the tribal authority and LEDET further exacerbate problems related to the distribution of benefits to neighbouring villages surrounding the MNR.

Currently, both reserves include management actions to improve communications with land claimants, neighbouring villages and private landowners by developing co-management committees and management advisory teams (NCC-Group, 2012a, NCC-Group, 2012b). However, rural communities neighbouring the reserve have not been identified as potential stakeholders represented in the Management Advisory Committee in the reserve's five year management strategy (NCC-Group 2012a). 'Public communication' may be seen by many wildlife managers as the only form of participatory involvement. However, communication and inclusion on a committee is less likely to translate to effective participation if stakeholders do not have the power to contribute to management decisions and policies within the reserves (Dahal, Nepal, and Schuett 2014)..

### *Immiseration*

European conquest and expansion during the colonial era resulted in the dispossession and physical alienation of indigenous people, who were enslaved or co-opted into enforced labour (Khan 1990). During apartheid decisions to halt the development of basic infrastructure development for villages in the Blouberg were taken without reference to local communities who were politically disempowered and their access to essential life supporting systems arbitrarily reduced. These changes, enforced by state actors, led to further disempowerment

during the establishment of the MNR whereby local people lost their remaining control over natural and cultural resources.

Villagers identify a variety of perceived costs associated with the establishment of protected areas. The establishment of the MNR, resulted in the reduction of the village to a quarter of its size and its isolation from neighbouring villages (Sebola 2004). Villagers associate nature reserves with restricted access to land for agriculture and grazing livestock, collecting firewood and gathering medicinal plants and wild fruits. Sacred sites are associated with particular landscape features in the Blouberg and used for burial sites, initiation and ceremonies to connect with ancestral spirits (Constant 2014). These sites have been integrated into protected areas by government resulting in restricted access to local people. Loss of community entitlement to cultural rights over sacred places creates mistrust and withdrawal of local support for protected areas (Wild and McLeod 2008).

Many villagers blame the presence of protected areas on the degree of poverty and environmental degradation they experience which is also tied to complex historical and contemporary socio-economic circumstances. Ga-Kgatla is in a state of impoverishment with 158 households without access to underground water other than that which is pumped daily by a generator in a village 5km away (Republic of South Africa 2011). The Integrated Development Plan for the Blouberg (2007-2008) states that Ga-Kgatla is a 'fourth order village' with no or limited growth potential (Blouberg Local Municipality 2007-2008: 30). Environmental degradation in the villages neighbouring the reserves is high due to deforestation, over-grazing and erosion (Blouberg Local Municipality 2013-2016). The migration of people from rural areas is commonplace in the Blouberg due to the lack of access to government facilities, employment opportunities and basic infrastructure (Blouberg

Local Municipality, 2013-2016). The migrant labour systems have encouraged men and the youth to seek work in the cities leaving behind women and the elderly to head the households, creating social disruption for households (Blouberg Local Municipality, 2013-2016).

In the Blouberg, human-wildlife resulting from leopard predation on livestock exerts significant economic and opportunity costs for both commercial and communal farmers living adjacent to the reserves (Constant, Bell, and Hill 2015). Management failure to communicate and allow rural villagers to effectively participate in reserve matters is a significant issue as rural villagers do not have the ability to articulate local problems about human-wildlife conflicts to conservationists, as well incidents related to the poaching of wildlife by rural communities within the reserve boundaries.

#### *Impacts of collective trauma*

The impacts of traumatic nature have long lasting consequences on how protected areas are understood and perceived. Dramatic changes in natural resource governance from the colonial era onwards have created a tendency for residents to construct leopards and conservationists as scapegoats to carry the blame for the costs they experience from the reserve's presence which are also intrinsically tied to historical and socio-economic factors. The tendency to scapegoat can be explained by the exclusionary nature of natural resource governance where local voices were muted and responsibility for economic stagnation is never accepted by specific individuals or organisations. Local people draw parallels between their interactions with leopards that predate on livestock and are imbued with anthropomorphic traits such as having 'no respect for fences,' and their interactions with government agencies: 'those people don't respect us,' and 'they don't listen.' Campbell (2000) suggests that the symbolic meanings of wild animals in folklore 'play with the

interpretative reversals between animals and human worlds' (ibid: 139-140). Here, local narratives of people's relationships with the natural environment is expressed as traumatic by the symbolism associated with it. Leopards feature in narratives as paralleling relationships with government actors. They are associated with predation, a form of loss and are viewed like conservationists in relation to boundaries that separate nature into areas where intrusion is not permitted.

While local people blame leopards as representative of baleful social relationships with government actors, wildlife authorities label the actions of rural villagers as environmentally destructive and criminalise some villages neighbouring nature reserves as harbouring 'poachers'. Stoll-Kleeman (2001) assesses how group membership affects a person's attitudes and behaviours towards protected areas through application of social identity theory. Social identity theory states that 'social categorisation results in social discrimination, because people make social comparisons between in-groups and out-groups,' resulting in the 'rejection of the out-group' (Stoll-Kleeman, 2001: 379). Stoll-Kleeman (2001) emphasises that favouring the in-group over the out-group can result in the attribution of the out-group to 'negative values and exaggerated stereotypes' (ibid: 379). This is observed in the ways Blouberg villagers represent themselves as victims of unfair poaching accusations from malicious authority figures while conservationists impose similar stereotypes upon rural villagers as 'poachers'.

Historical trauma is manifested in the tendency of local residents to oscillate between different aspects of nature for example, different animals and landscapes and draw parallels between past and present to describe what life was like before the reserves establishment. Narratives often describe a change in sense of place either through a change in the



peacefulness of the landscape, or relationships with animals which are marked by conflict and hostility. The establishment of game reserves and protected areas introduced new concepts of nature and culture as they became ‘the means by which many people see, understand, experience, and use the parts of the world that are often called nature and the environment’ (West et al 2006: 255). Protected areas serve as models for the separation of nature and human societies heralded through the development of a preservation ideology that excludes people from the natural realm. In a similar fashion, leopards are excluded from the human realm when they penetrate into areas of human settlement.

Similar, oscillations in discourse are associated with the meanings of protected areas. Contemporary discourses and actions towards protected areas demonstrate a consistent counter-discourse to challenge the mainstream ecological discourses surrounding protected areas. Local people make use of ecological rhetoric to describe the functionality of protected areas as a mechanism for preventing the extinction of wildlife and bequest values to maintain resources for future generations. Such representations are also used against conservationists as a form of resistance. Counter-discourses identify the consequences of excluding rural communities from environmental decision-making through the continuation of poaching wildlife inside reserve boundaries and withdrawal of support for the protection of wild animals.

The motives underlying patterns of scapegoating and discursive oscillations in narrative structure relate to the turbulent history of conflicts over land and natural resource use and the exclusionary forms of environmental governance where locals have had limited opportunities to express their grievances. These deep-rooted perceptions undermine support for protected areas, as well as trust-building and relationships between government actors and

communities. However, narratives of resistance are also evident in the ways local people use language and counter-discourses to challenge imposed stereotypes to re-assert local rights to access land and natural resources and exclusion from protected areas. Unless local voices are acknowledged and included in the governance of protected areas, underlying trauma can act as an engine for conflicting behaviours to emerge. In Blouberg villages, this tendency can be observed when villagers make verbal threats to wildlife authorities and carry out physical acts of protest such as setting reserves on fire.

### *Implications for protected areas and communities*

Traumatic nature offers a useful lens to analysis people's relationships with the environment, and perceptions and reactions to protected areas because it provides a way forward to encourage inclusion by highlighting why and how such marginalisation occurs in the first place. Representations uncovered in discourses and narratives serve as tools for uncovering power and resistance. Once articulated such representations can generate new forms of knowledge, which challenge conservationists to reconsider the impact of their often unconscious assumptions. Helping communities to overcome social trauma involving nature requires government actors to first identify and become aware of the long-term impacts of top-down governance structures at the local level and to recognise that the future of biodiversity conservation is dependent on establishing meaningful engagement and cooperation with communities surrounding protected areas. A lack of trust and dialogue between disparate groups is a fundamental barrier for engagement therefore efforts to improve communication and build trust are essential (Redpath et al. 2013). However, the impacts of traumatic nature may give rise to intense discussions amongst stakeholders to air their grievances about past and contemporary conflicts. Therefore, stakeholders must be prepared to listen to one another's concerns and priorities, even if individuals are in

disagreement with them. A third party facilitator may improve engagement among disparate groups. However, the type of third-party involved should not be a government actor, but personnel who are evaluated for their suitability based on assessments of the nature of conflict, discrepancies in power and the willingness among parties to engage in dialogue (Redpath et al. 2013). Participatory and deliberative engagement through the implementation of co-management agreements has been used as one strategy to engage and manage conflicts between stakeholders but should not be viewed as a panacea for remediation as governance structures can still maintain power and knowledge asymmetries if poorly implemented (Berkes 2009). In any case study, the root cause of conflicts must first be identified and unravelled before effective dialogue and discussion can ensue.

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